

A Review of Jonathan Brown's "Perspectives on Salvation Outside of Islam"

Mobeen Vaid

Introduction

A common misunderstanding among Muslims is that criticism is equivalent to denunciation. When people disagree, it must be out of a deep-seated hatred, or an underlying contempt for those with whom they disagree with. This, however, is rarely the case (though of course it sometimes is). Perhaps some of this is due to the WWE/Kardashian/Democrat v. Republican/etc. style of arguing that we have grown accustomed to witnessing and finding amusement in. At its core, there is something satanic about relishing unhinged disputation, and many otherwise kind people absorb this behavior and manifest it in their online persona. I pray to Allah that I am not of them, and welcome any *naṣīḥa* (publicly or privately) should it seem that I am headed down that path.

I offer this as a disclaimer for what follows. Below is an admittedly brief reflection and review of Jonathan Brown's recent Yaqeen Institute piece on Salvation and Non-Muslims. Prior to proceeding, it should be noted that I think very highly of Dr. Brown as a scholar and person. He has an endearing personality (and odd interest in movies!), and his erudition puts him in rare company. Indeed, very few people exist today with his ability to defend the Islamic tradition against those who call into question its foundations. But it is not merely his abilities that are worth noting, but his willingness to employ those abilities in addressing some of the most complex and sensitive topics of the day. Here, he should be lauded for addressing – and rather directly so – the hadith tradition, the scriptural integrity of the Quran, the presumption of innocence, Islamic political engagement, homosexuality, slavery, the age of Aisha (ra), and much, much more. These are not easy subjects to broach, and plenty have elected to avoid them altogether. For that, Dr. Brown should be commended, and readers are encouraged to familiarize themselves with his scholarly works, including, but not limited to, his excellent treatment of the interpretive legacy of Islam in *Misquoting Muhammad*.

Given this history, it should come as no surprise that Brown has elected to once again broach a rather delicate and complex subject in attending to the question of salvation and non-Muslims in the hereafter. There are many strengths in the paper, and I will begin by highlighting them. Thereafter, I will address what I consider to be problematic in the paper and conclude with a few thoughts for reflection.

The Islamic Tradition

Brown should be credited for a number of things in this piece. He correctly asserts, and categorically so, the correct position, namely, that salvation is found in Islam alone. This should not be made light of, particularly given the many voices misrepresenting Islamic soteriology, either on account of alternative philosophies/worldviews, or after succumbing to the 'all paths' model as cohering more readily with a pluralistic and ecumenical society (a notion Brown discusses well in the piece). Aside from the correct position of salvific exclusivity, Brown attends to two approaches that admit a more expansive notion of salvation. In presenting these two approaches, Brown problematizes key arguments made by their exponents and proceeds to ultimately repudiate them as inconsistent with Islamic teachings found in the Quran and Sunnah. In addition to this survey of varying approaches, God's mercy is appealed to, alongside God's ultimate judgment being just, and that the justice of God is something believers should find comfort in.

That said, the article suffers from several problems, some less severe, while others are rather significant. To begin, perhaps the first issue stems from the general framing of approaches, all of which are said to belong to the "Islamic tradition." However, the two other views, as Brown himself notes, are relatively

recent and hold no precedent in what would qualify as the Islamic tradition. Fazlur Rahman, Farid Esack, and Perennialists (exponents unnamed, though tendentious attribution to Ibn Arabi is thankfully rebutted) are all modern advocates of the two heterodox views Brown adumbrates. Accordingly, it would have been better to characterize them as contemporary approaches to make clear their newfangled revisionism, and to describe only the “correct” position, alongside the annihilationism of Ibn Taymiyya, as part of the Islamic tradition proper. Although such a concern may seem pedantic to some, what we construe as representing the tradition is in fact quite serious, particularly insofar as we consider that tradition as meaningful and representing a discourse that we hold fidelity to.

Forgiving a Reached *Mushrik*

Moving on to more significant errors, perhaps the single most problematic element of Brown’s paper is his explicit injection of personal opinion stating that a “reached” *mushrik* may be forgiven and enter paradise. Brown deserves credit for transparently stating that this was his opinion, though that qualification does not absolve the error (certainly not one of this magnitude). The opinion in question appears twice in the paper and reads as follows:

“As far as I know this is only my opinion, but it thus seems entirely possible that a non-Muslim who believed in God and did enormous good deeds, even one who had committed shirk (the grievous sin of associating partners with God), might face only temporary punishment for their error before attaining salvation in the Garden.”

“To be clear, what follows here is just my idea: it thus also seems possible that God could forgive the sin of shirk for a reason other than repentance, perhaps as an expression of His immeasurable mercy.”

These quotes and the specific idea being averred – that God can perhaps forgive the sin of *shirk* for an otherwise “reached” individual who made no repentance – directly contradicts the words of God Himself. Indeed, Allah tells us time and again that *shirk* is a most grievous sin, the greatest of injustices, and a crime that is unforgivable absent worldly repentance. So serious is *shirk* that Allah describes its adherents as spiritually “impure” (*najas*) and regards the mere ascription of progeny to Allah as so severe that the heavens approach rupturing, the earth splitting apart, and the mountains collapsing in devastation (Q 19:90). Muslims are instructed to neither marry the *mushrikīn*, nor to eat the meat they slaughter. Moreover, believers are told that it is neither for the Prophet (pbuh), nor for those who believe, to entreat Allah’s forgiveness for the *mushrikīn* after they have passed, even if they were kin (Q 9:113). Of this, the scholarly consensus is resolute, and the Islamic tradition has never differed over the substantive transgression of *shirk* in the eyes of Allah and the gravity of what it entails in the hereafter.

Though many proofs can be brought to bear delineating this, the most explicit in condemning *shirk* as unpardonable appears in *Sūrat al-Nisā’* when Allah states: “Indeed, Allah does not forgive association with Him, but He forgives what is less than that for whom He wills. And he who associates others with Allah has certainly fabricated a tremendous sin.” (Q 4:48)

Reports differ concerning the occasion of revelation, though an incident cited in the exegetical work of al-Ṭabarī elucidates the implications of this verse further. In the mentioned incident, a group of Companions witnessed the revelation of “Say, [O Prophet, that Allah says,] “O My servants who have exceeded the limits against their souls! Do not despair of Allah’s mercy, for Allah certainly forgives all sins...” (Q 39:53). Upon hearing the verse, the Companions questioned whether this seemingly limitless mercy applied to *shirk* as well. In response to this question, the Prophet (pbuh) recited the aforementioned verse stating

that Allah does not forgive *shirk*, though He forgives other than that for whomever He wills. The implication here is clear: *shirk* is a red line that demands worldly repentance and will not be forgiven in the afterlife.

I want to be very clear: what is being spoken of here is not an “alternate perspective,” or a position that has held any disagreement to speak of. It is the consensus-based position that is a direct reflection of countless verses and hadiths attesting to the perilousness of associationism – to depart from God’s path, to reject and refuse Him, and to direct worship to anything other than Him. To suggest a possibility of forgiveness that then militates against this creedal foundation upon which the very religion of Islam is built is not merely heterodox, but unfounded, unacceptable, and worthy of outright rejection.

Brown anchors this baseless speculation on grounds of mercy. Perhaps, it is suggested, that God can express His immeasurable mercy by blessing all with paradise at some point or another. The reasoning on display is not only speculative in the extreme, but seems oblivious to the palpable implications: if clear instruction can be subject to such amendment, then one could just as easily suggest that perhaps God, out of this same infinite mercy, will elect to show clemency to all without account, or that perhaps in the end we will come to learn that Hell itself was little more than a cautionary term deployed to encourage compliance with injunction just as a father may threaten his child with a non-existent punishment in hopes that obedience will ensue. Such conjecture has no purchase in an Islam properly understood, and to suggest otherwise is irresponsible to a community tasked with spreading the message of Islam for the precise reason of rescuing themselves and an errant people from the punishment of the Fire.

How Important is Islam?

Aside from groundless opining, Brown’s piece is replete with an attitude of internal conflict. The correct position is outlined briefly and declared correct in the conclusion, but only as an academic, theoretical submission that is then attenuated immediately thereafter. Brown asks his reader in the concluding remarks to consider the following question:

Does one believe that accepting the specific religious message of Muhammad ﷺ, as it has been preserved and transmitted down to our times, is so important that rejecting it means suffering eternally in Hellfire, whether that punishment is physical or a spiritual alienation from God? Put more simply, is believing in Islam so important that you’re willing to declare that non-Muslims have no hope for peace in the Afterlife?

In an egregious sleight of hand, Brown imputes blame upon his readership for the position of Islam and the words of Allah. The problem here is not that Allah has stated unequivocally that *shirk* is unforgivable, or that Allah and His Messenger (pbuh) have required submission to the Islamic message for salvation, but that obdurate believers have chosen to put themselves in God’s place. Who are *you* to say which doctrine is salvifically acceptable? What qualifies *you* to place judgment, even in conceptual terms (that abstain from individual judgments aside from those designated in scripture and reliable hadiths), on those who refuse the call of Islam and persist in unbelief and associationism?

But the rhetorical ask is not merely one of blame, but of inquisition. Is Islam really *that* important to you? Must Islam be made into the ultimate human pursuit such that unbelief leads to eternal damnation? It is unclear what the alternative would look like. If following the specific religious message of Muhammad (pbuh), which itself claims to abrogate all pre-Muhammad dispensations, is an inadequate basis for eternal damnation, then why did Allah and His Messenger (pbuh) mention eternal damnation at all? And given that they did, what sin would truly qualify for this ignominious end?

The question Brown presents speaks to larger existential questions of existence, the afterlife, human purpose, and devotion. Muslim theologians agreed that the fundamental tenets of Islam had to be rationally apprehensible for this exact reason, and the human condition is such that Allah created in all the primordial disposition recognizing in these tenets Truth. Indeed, the path of Islam is the purpose for which we were created, and it is only through it that we can find complete peace, spiritual fulfillment, and an opportunity for paradise. We ask Allah to forgive us and grant us entry into it.

Conclusion

Though there is much laudable and important in this latest Yaqeen Institute paper, it ultimately falls short in significant areas. Brown's piece reads with a stream of uncertainty, containing rhetorical asks of whether believing in Islam is "important enough" to declare which doctrines qualify as salvifically efficacious. At times, one feels when reading the paper that finding comfort in God's absolute justice and mercy is done as a concession for a belief that doesn't entirely seem to make sense it seems, or perhaps is too judgmental when taken at face value. Brown's unfortunate appeals to his "own ideas" about *shirk* being forgivable - in spite of explicit verses in the Quran to the contrary - cannot, and should not, be sanctioned.

Given the stakes, we should be confidently explaining what the consensus-based position of Islam is and offering a full and comprehensive treatment of it as understood and expressed by our tradition, and then defending it against contemporary accusations of arrogance, bigotry, hatred, and the like.

The net result of the paper is to see the question of salvation as a complicated one that requires no direct engagement or reflection for the average Muslim. Who is saved and not saved is beyond our calling, so we shouldn't worry about it it seems. Yet this is precisely the opposite of what we should be calling our community and youth to be considering - salvation is an essential question for all individuals, and our commitment to Islam's exclusive salvific efficacy should be something that motivates us to live according to its tenets such that we can faithfully claim Islam on the Day of Judgment and perhaps then find ourselves worthy of Allah's Mercy and the Prophet's (pbuh) company. It should further prompt us to care about spreading this message and teaching it to those ignorant of its teachings and are inundated with misrepresentations.

On a final note, I wish here to remind my readers what I mentioned in the outset. Dr. Jonathan Brown is a scholar of the highest order, and this critique should not be construed as a slight in any form or fashion against his scholarship, integrity, piety, or contributions to the community. We are blessed to have him as a voice representing Islam, and I certainly look forward to future writings of his (particularly his forthcoming book, which as I understand is in the works). May Allah bless him, his family, and the Yaqeen Institute for the good that they do, and may He overlook their shortcomings. Ameen.

“Our Lord, pour upon us patience and let us die as Muslims” (Q 7:126). Ameen.

Allah Knows Best.